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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE WAKE OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK CRISIS

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
10 October 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

French Foreign Policy in the Wake of the Czechoslovak Crisis

Summary

De Gaulle's initial response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia was "business as usual" with the invaders. Recent evidence, however, suggests that the French President may be reappraising his policies to ensure that France continues to play a dominant role in Europe. It is not clear yet what he wants or where he intends to go, but it would appear that he is taking a new look at the question of European security. The last several weeks appear to have been a time of floating trial balloons, of probing for reactions, of looking for new approaches. Whether French foreign policy is in an important transition--either toward a new initiative in Europe or toward temporary retreat to concentrate on domestic problems--will become clear only in the months to come.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and the Office of Strategic Research.

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De Gaulle's Views on the Eve of the Czechoslovak Crisis

1. In the months just prior to the Soviet-led military intervention in Czechoslovakia, De Gaulle believed that he was witnessing significant progress toward accomplishment of his long-range goals of "detente, entente, and then cooperation" in Europe. He was encouraged by the increasingly independent line taken by many regimes in Eastern Europe and by the course of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia. De Gaulle told confidants that the US, under the combined pressure of domestic strife and the Vietnam war, would be forced to adopt a more limited role in Europe. Thus, looking to the East and the West, De Gaulle saw signs which confirmed his view that the tensions of the past were subsiding, and that the "policy of blocs" was becoming increasingly obsolete.

2. Given this assessment, De Gaulle continued a number of policy initiatives which he believed would lead to a still further relaxation of tension. Political contacts with Eastern Europe and the USSR multiplied. Franco-Soviet scientific and technical cooperation continued to flourish. France also continued to oppose the entrance of Britain into the Common Market in order to ensure French primacy in Western Europe. Seeing a solution to the German problem as the key to detente in Europe, De Gaulle maintained close ties with Bonn and encouraged the Germans to adopt a liberal policy toward Eastern Europe. At the same time, De Gaulle moved to improve French relations with the United States. Following President Johnson's announcement on 30 March limiting bombing in Vietnam, French officials at every level of the government adopted a much more cooperative attitude toward the US. No policy shifts occurred, but it was clear that the Elyseé was moving to alter the style, if not the substance, of French policy toward the US.

3. The Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia was a drastic setback for De Gaulle. In late July he had characterized the Czechoslovak situation as "but an episode in the inevitable process of gradually relaxing Russian control over the countries of the socialist bloc." Although his

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foreign minister, Michel Debre, sounded a clear alarm, De Gaulle appears to have believed to the end that the Soviets would not use military force in their dispute with Prague.

Post-Crisis Assessment

4. In the first weeks following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, De Gaulle seemed determined to continue his major policies despite his surprise and disappointment over the turn of events. His post-invasion statement condemning the invasion, criticizing the "policy of blocs," and affirming the correctness of his detente efforts neither contradicted nor repudiated any major policies enunciated in the past. The immediate assumption was that De Gaulle had not been forced into an "agonizing reappraisal" of his policies, although he acknowledged that his goal of detente had been "momentarily thwarted." General guidelines were established which laid down a "business as usual" approach in cultural, scientific, and economic areas but which provided for curtailment on the political front pending a change in the Soviet posture. The continuing emphasis on detente, coupled with De Gaulle's unwillingness to see NATO strengthened or made the focal point of Western discussion and action, seemed to confirm that he believed the possibility of a Soviet attack on Western Europe was remote. The general outline of French policy, then, seemed clear as of early September: no to blocs, NATO, and reappraisals and yes to detente. By mid-September, however, a number of signs began to emerge which raised the possibility that De Gaulle was in fact rethinking his stand.

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5. Lending credence to the view that French foreign policy may take a new turn [redacted] De Gaulle has just called for a major review of foreign policy by December under the direction of Prime Minister Maurice Couve de Murville. Despite his contradictory statements in the post-invasion days on the possibility of aggression, it seems clear he himself does not fear a Russian military move. His neighbors in Western Europe, however, and particularly in Bonn, are fearful of future aggression and it is their reaction which prompted his recent actions.

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6. De Gaulle hopes to prevent the Czechoslovak crisis from driving the Germans more closely into the arms of the US and forcing Bonn to assert its own interest more actively at France's expense. Either development would lessen France's ability to exert substantial influence over certain aspects of Bonn's foreign policy. Nevertheless, France's inept tactics during the recent De Gaulle - Kiesinger talks appear only to have exacerbated Franco-German relations. De Gaulle not only failed to offer the unambiguous pledge of military support so desired by Kiesinger, but he also infuriated the German chancellor by suggesting that German policy might have been a factor in provoking the Soviet invasion. These counterproductive moves may have stemmed from De Gaulle's uncertainty about which tack to take in the new situation brought about by the Czechoslovak crisis. His perplexity about the best means to preserve his dominant role in Western Europe without committing France unilaterally to the position of defender may explain the recent surfacing of two different approaches to European security.

Possible Alternatives

7. One of the ideas which came to light in mid-September concerned the possible revival of the concept of a European Defense Community (EDC).*

*France proposed in 1950 and then rejected in 1954 the original EDC treaty. This treaty called for an integrated European army with national units from the participating countries, which included only the "little Six"--France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries. A commissariat with weighted representation from the member countries was to function as the executive body, with the Council of Ministers of the European Coal and Steel Community participating in some decisions. At the same time that the foreign ministers of the Six signed the EDC, they also signed a mutual defense treaty with the UK. France, Britain and the US then signed a tripartite declaration in which the latter two signatories stated that any menacing action against the EDC would be regarded as an attack on their own security. Gaullists vehemently opposed the treaty, which they believed would have an

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[redacted] reports [redacted] indicated that it was the French who would take the initiative in proposing an EDC during the De Gaulle - Kiesinger talks on 27-28 September. The reports, however, contained a number of points which seemed questionable: that the US was willing to see an organization parallel to NATO and led by France established at this juncture; that Paris would tolerate a European military grouping in which some of the members, and notably Germany, would also continue to be members of NATO; that France would accept a mixed command in place of French control; and that De Gaulle would accept the UK in such a grouping even though London continued to keep its nuclear weapons under the NATO aegis.

8. Moreover, both French and German officials, when queried on the issue, stated that there was no substance to the stories. A ranking French Foreign Ministry official labeled the stories "pure fantasy" and at variance with De Gaulle's military thinking. [redacted] the De Gaulle - Kiesinger talks gave no hint that the subject was raised.

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9. What does seem reasonably clear is that a trial balloon was being floated, probably by the Germans but encouraged by the French* and aimed at eliciting some sort of response from the US. Although it is doubtful that either Bonn or Paris is seriously considering the concept of an EDC at this juncture, the trial balloon reflects both Bonn's need for reassurance on security and France's interest in meeting that need.

extremely negative effect on France's national army. They joined with other parties to vote down the treaty in the National Assembly.

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10. A second idea, surfaced late in September, is that De Gaulle is interested in re-opening tripartite discussions on the nuclear defense of Europe. Quai Director of American Affairs Jurgensen, when asked to comment on the substance of the talks of 23 September between Ambassador Shriver and De Gaulle, interpreted De Gaulle's comments as an indication of interest in US-UK-French discussions on a nuclear directorate. From a reading of the cable reporting Shriver's account of the talks, this intention does not come through. The primary thrust of De Gaulle's argument, according to Shriver, was that the US could not be counted on to risk a nuclear war to defend Western Europe. De Gaulle maintained that because European countries either singly or collectively lacked the strength to stand up to the Russians, the prime question was whether the US would respond immediately with nuclear weapons if German borders were violated. He said France would not regard an invasion of West Germany as an invasion of France, a stand which Shriver believed explained De Gaulle's conviction that the US, too, would not deploy all its resources in such a situation. Although De Gaulle repeatedly refused to give Shriver any indication that France would undertake any new commitments regarding the security of the West, he stated that if the US responded with all of its power to an attack on Europe, France would respond with all its power.

11. It is possible that De Gaulle would see a tripartite agreement automatically to commit nuclear weapons to the defense of Europe as a desirable goal. The political and military aspects of such an agreement are intertwined, as they were in 1958 when De Gaulle originally proposed a tripartite directorate involving the same three powers, and he would doubtless hope to reap political as well as military benefits. For such an arrangement to be acceptable to France, De Gaulle would have to be recognized by the other participants as speaking for Europe. He would expect to have a veto on the use of nuclear weapons in Europe as well as a guarantee that the weapons would be used if France so requested. Washington's announced policy of responding in the first instance to a conventional attack with its own conventional forces has never

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been acceptable to De Gaullle, who sees the flexible response theory as an indication that the US, in a showdown, would not risk its own existence for Europe.

12. That De Gaulle might be interested in such a triumvirate, then, is possible. He is politically astute enough, however, to realize that Washington would not readily abandon the theory of flexible response and that a tripartite directorate would be anathema to Bonn. British support for such a plan would depend on whether London believed it to be another French maneuver to keep the UK permanently out of Europe or whether participation would be seen as a step toward inclusion in future Western European security arrangments. Despite this, De Gaulle may hope to capitalize on the recent thaw in Franco-American relations and on Washington's interest in solving the problems of Europe's defense to persuade the US to enter into bilateral discussions on the question.

13. De Gaulle may, then, have decided that the tensions in Western Europe created by the Czechoslovak crisis make some new move necessary. It is clear from his initial response that he is adamantly opposed to proposals for a revival and strengthening of NATO. He may, however, feel the need to propose alternatives as a counter to demands for a strengthened NATO. Even if such alternatives should ultimately prove unacceptable, he would have again taken center stage in the world arena and would have an answer to any charges by critics that he was unresponsive to the new situation in Europe. Future French proposals may bear a resemblance to the two defense ideas already floated--a revival of some form of an EDC or a tripartite nuclear directorate--but it is also possible that some new and as yet undisclosed scheme may be outlined.

14. Another possible course of action has been suggested by British diplomats. The logical thrust of De Gaulle's mind, according to these observers, may lead him not only to oppose further advances toward European economic and political unity, but also to retreat to a policy verging on isolationist

neutralism. Ranking German officials, too, fear De Gaulle may be in the process of withdrawing from his commitments. A decision to concentrate on France's internal problems to the exclusion of foreign policy initiatives is not beyond the realm of possibility. It would constitute a major departure from previous Gaullist policy, however, and would probably only be pursued if his foreign policy gambits had failed badly.